Exotic Batfish Become Part of Educational Exhibit

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The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary recently dispatched two unlikely ambassadors to warn of a threat to the delicate balance of the coral reef ecosystem. Working in partnership with New England Aquarium, Dynasty Marine Associates and Reef Environmental Education Foundation, Sanctuary managers removed two Pacific Teira batfish from Molasses Reef off Key Largo. The fish now reside at the New England Aquarium, where they are part of an educational exhibit about the problems posed by the introduction of exotic species to the marine environment.

Two exotic Pacific batfish removed from Sanctuary waters are now part of an educational exhibit housed at the New England Aquarium. The exhibit focuses on the problems associated with introducing exotic species to marine ecosystems.

Pacific batfish are native to the South Pacific and are not related to the odd-shaped, bottom-dwelling batfish found in the Keys. In fact, the fish are related to and closely resemble the Atlantic spadefish native to the Keys, except that they grow larger and exhibit yellow markings.

Divers and snorkelers had reported sightings of one Pacific batfish at Molasses Reef for six years. But reports of a second and third fish alarmed Sanctuary staff. When REEF confirmed that three individuals were living at Molasses Reef, Sanctuary managers decided to remove the intruders in a friendly way.

No one knows for certain how the three batfish arrived at Molasses Reef, but it's likely that saltwater aquarium owners released them. Sold as juveniles, Pacific batfish can grow to 24 inches, too large for many tanks.

Releasing exotic species is prohibited in the Sanctuary. Setting free one fish may seem harmless but can open the doorway to environmental catastrophe. If left alone, Sanctuary managers feared the fish could begin to breed and upset the natural ecosystem.

Capturing the first batfish took only a few minutes, but locating and capturing the wary second fish took more than an hour. Underwater scooters aided the collectors as they pursued the batfish up and down the reef. The divers finally netted the fish as it tried to hide among a school of spadefish, which they carefully freed.

After a quarantine period, the New England Aquarium released the two fish into a tank modeled after a Keys coral reef. The third batfish remains at large, but Sanctuary managers believe the fish poses minimal threat on its own.

Did you know?

***Spiny lobster, grouper, and snapper have shown an increase in abundance in some of the Sanctuary's 23 no-take areas.**

***Scientists noted that the average size of legal lobsters was larger in the no-take areas than in adjacent fished areas.**

***REEF's Advanced Assessment Team regularly surveys 31 sites in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, including 12 SPAs, 3 Research-only Areas, 1 Ecological Reserve, and 6 sites in the proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve.**

***In its National Action Plan to Conserve Coral Reefs, the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force recommends that 5% of all U.S. coral reefs be designated "no-take" marine reserves by the year 2002.**

Note: This article appeared in the Winter 2000 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line.** *For more information, visit:* **www.fknmns.nos.noaa.gov.**